

Christianity's Dirty Words sermon series
#5 – Salvation
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Today's sermon is a bookend to last week's sermon on sin. To understand the word "salvation" and its meaning in the context of faith, we first have to understand the concept of sin. Salvation only makes sense if we understand what we're being saved from.

But that understanding doesn't always come easily, because the word "salvation," or more accurately, the idea of "being saved," have taken on a life of their own in our culture. "Being saved" has become something like a check of your spiritual I.D. to make sure you're worthy of being allowed in the club.

When I was young, I remember visiting a church in my hometown that had a "holy roller" reputation. I was playing on the playground before church started when a boy came up to me and asked, "Have you been saved?" Now, I had never heard this question before, so I assumed he was referring to some form of danger that lurked on the playground, maybe a pit of quicksand or a charge rhino or something. So I looked around and said, "Saved from what?" And he paused for a second, and said, "Hmm. I don't know. I just know it's important." Yes it is important to be saved, but it's just as important to know what we're being saved from.

I would guess the understanding of the word "salvation" in our culture is not great, but the concept is very popular. I believe one of the greatest hungers of our society is a desire to be saved from the empty promises of this world. People look for salvation in therapists' offices and self-help books and TV talk shows. Webster's defines salvation as "the act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, destruction, etc." People are looking for anything that will protect them from the risks of living life, so they seek salvation.

But that's not the word that gets used. In fact, the word "salvation" isn't spoken much outside church at all. Like the word "sin," "salvation" is a word mostly used by insiders. We Disciples of Christ tend to shy away from salvation language; we don't talk about "being saved." But we believe in it nonetheless. Do we know what we mean when we talk about salvation? What does it mean to be saved? What does it look like?

Like the boy who approached me on the playground, many people talk about being saved as if it is a one-time event. You're unsaved, and then – boom! – you're saved. It's like the metal detectors at airports. We need salvation detectors at our church doors. When someone steps through and the alarm goes off, we hand them a Bible and say, "Sir, would you please step back and read the Gospel of Luke?"

There is an example in the Bible that supports this view of a one-time salvation event. Paul is converted in an instant on the road to Damascus. The problem is that Paul's experience has been lifted up as the norm for conversions. Unsaved – boom! – saved. But that is only one example of salvation in the Bible, and we need to look at the whole body of God's work before defining what salvation means.

The Bible talks about salvation in three ways. The first way is in the past tense. Paul says in Romans 8, "For this hope we were saved." Through Christ's death on the cross, all those we believe in him were saved. The danger of this viewpoint, of course, is

that we view salvation only in the past tense, we may think that everything's already done and we therefore can live our lives however we want. "I'm already saved, what does it matter if I beat up a Colts fan?" Salvation in the past tense doesn't mean we don't have some present responsibilities as believers. Paul tells the Corinthians, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful you don't fall!" In other words, just because you're saved doesn't mean you're free to check your common sense and good judgment at the door. A person whose heart has been changed by salvation will always reflect that salvation in the way they live their lives and the choices they make. They will reflect the spirit of God that now dwells within them by virtue of their salvation.

The Bible also talks about salvation in the future tense, pointing toward that time when Christ will come again. Paul says until that moment, we wait eagerly for our adoption as children of God. Salvation has occurred through Jesus Christ, and will be fully realized when God's kingdom comes here on earth.

The problem with this view is that if people believe their ultimate salvation is yet to come, they begin to wonder what they need to do to ensure that. I call it the "Jesus is coming – look busy!" syndrome. There was a man in the Bible who fell prey to this way of thinking. He was a rich man who felt he had done everything Jesus wanted him to do. He was a good man, upstanding citizen, solid believer. To ensure his eternal salvation, he asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life? The downfall of this man was his emphasis is on the word "do." As soon as we start believing there's something we can do to earn salvation – the technical term is works-righteousness – we've lost sight of the Christ's work on the cross. Salvation is abandoning the misconception that you are rejected because of your bad behavior or accepted because of your goodness.

But some people think of salvation as a trophy rather than a gift, something to be earned once they have enough gold stars on their spiritual chore chart. Others equate joining the church with salvation; if we put ourselves around other believers, salvation will rub off on us. I heard a very disturbing statistic last week at a conference: 60% of church attenders have unconverted hearts. Sixty percent of people in church have not done the one thing needed to be saved. That one thing is stated by Peter in his great sermon on the day of Pentecost. He says simply, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How can 60% of churchgoers, people who presumably listen to the gospel every week, not accept this free gift God offers? What is keeping them from accepted Christ as their Savior?

So the Bible talks about salvation in the past tense and in the future tense. The third and most intriguing way the Bible talks about salvation is in the present tense. Paul, who obviously talked a lot about salvation, says this to the church in Corinth: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." "Are being saved," he says. In another passage he tells the Corinthians not to lose heart, because "though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."

This present tense understanding of salvation is most powerful, because it helps us better understand what is being saved. The primary way we interpret salvation is that, because of Christ's death on the cross, we are saved from the penalty of our sins. John Stott said that the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. By dying on the cross, Jesus saved us from the paying the price for our sinfulness and cleared the way for us to go to Heaven.

But if we put a period at the end our definition there, we miss the point. As Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland note in their book, "If Grace Is True," "Salvation is more than a ticket to Heaven. It is more than a Get Out of Hell Free card. It is more than just eternal life. Salvation is being freed of every obstacle to intimacy with God." That's the present tense of salvation. It's not just the one-and-done deal of forgiving our sins; it's not just the future hope of getting into Heaven. We are being saved day by day so that we can be in relationship with God. And that requires us every day to die to our sinful self and rise as a child of God.

We tend to focus so much on what we are saved from that we forget what we are saved for. Although our culture doesn't use the word "salvation" much, it uses another word with the same root: "Salvage." Webster's defines "salvage" as "to save for further use." There's a show on the Discovery Channel called "Dirty Jobs." Have you seen this? The host, Mike Rowe, goes around doing some of the most disgusting jobs imaginable, like, and I quote, "salmon carcass counter, owl vomit collector, and volcanic mud bath mixer." On one show, Mike joined a couple of guys whose job it was to suit up in scuba gear and go to local golf courses. They would dive into all the ponds and retrieve the golf balls. I noticed a few of them had the name "Kory Wilcoxson" written on them. They would then clean off the golf balls and resell them.

In working with us, God has a dirty job. Do you agree? God's work is salvage work. God has to dip his hand into the mess and muck of our lives to salvage our souls. God dipped his son into this world so he could do salvage work on the cross. If we only think we are saved from something, we're missing the salvage work of Christ.

We are also saved for something. We are saved to be God's children on this earth. We are saved to continue God's salvage work in the lives of others. We are saved to be God's witnesses, to be the embodiment of God's love to others. Being saved from sin is wonderful, but being saved for God's work is even better. I get asked occasionally, "How can I know that I'm saved?" I believe that this is the evidence of salvation: because you have received this free gift from God, your life no longer revolves around yourself, but around God's presence and work in your life, and your gratitude is expressed in giving your life to God for God's use.

We have been saved. We will be saved. And every day we are being saved, saved from the destructiveness of sin and saved for God's salvage work. I'll ask you the question I was once asked: Are you saved? Have you said, "Jesus, I accept you as my Savior, and in return I give you my life"? If you are, the God bless you. If not, if you are one of the 60%, come see me, I'd love to hear your story. I believe I have a wonderful gift to offer you, a gift that fills the hunger you feel deep down inside. It's an amazing gift, actually. And the best part? It's free.